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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000144

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: INFORMATION MINISTER ON SYRIAN, IRANIAN,  
SAUDI DIPLOMACY

REF: A) BEIRUT 00094 B) BEIRUT 00133

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a 1/26 meeting, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi (Druse, allied with Walid Jumblatt) provided details on Syrian, Iranian, and Saudi diplomacy in recent days. Based on what he claims to know, Aridi was pessimistic that the 1/25 riots marked the end to the violence. Syria, he insisted, will continue to create problems. A Sunni-Shiite conflict is very dangerous and not in Iran's interest. But Syria was able to undo a nascent Iranian-Saudi initiative to move toward a Lebanese political solution to reduce tensions.

In the sole ray of hope that Aridi offered, he said that, due to Saudi diplomacy, a door was reopened between Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Jumblatt. While agreeing that the LAF's performance this week was disappointing, Aridi (close to the LAF Chief of Staff, a fellow Druse) insisted that the LAF is not in collusion with the opposition. On Paris III, Aridi alleged that Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh engaged in "scandalous" pre-Paris III debt rescheduling agreements that profited him and some bankers. End summary.

2. (C) In a meeting in his ministry office on 1/26, the morning after violent student riots, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi gave the Ambassador and EconOff insight into the Lebanese Gordian knot over the last two weeks. While it was impossible within the framework of the meeting to re-confirm the exact timeline of events he described, this represents our best understanding of the various high points of Syrian, Saudi, and Iranian contacts regarding Lebanon in the period Aridi described. Aridi was also one of the relatively few influential ministers in Beirut when the student riots (which he believed started spontaneously, although both sides were, he said, well-prepared for the possibility), given the large delegation at Paris III. Aridi seemed to delight in relating what he said were the key elements in recent events.

AFTER FLIRTING WITH THE SAUDIS,  
IRAN SHIFTS TO SYRIAN IDEAS

3. (C) According to Aridi, on Monday of last week (January 15), Iranian security chief Ali Larajani went to Damascus to discuss what Aridi referred to as the Khoja initiative (ref A), after its proponent, Saudi ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja. This proposal supposedly developed out of earlier discussions between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Larajani

and Prince Bandar bin Sultan) and has the following elements: acceptance of the Special Tribunal, an expanded cabinet along a 19-10-1 split, and elections according to the current schedule, i.e. presidential elections at the end of 2007 and parliamentary elections in 2009. However, as Khoja was circulating the idea, Larajani took the road to Damascus.

¶4. (C) Outraged with the Khoja initiative, the Syrians scuttled the proposal and shifted the Iranian thinking back in Damascus' direction. Acceding to the Syrians, the Iranians changed the proposal: tribunal establishment only after the UNIIIC completes its inquiry, an expanded cabinet with a 19-11 split (e.g., giving March 8-Aoun the blocking/toppling minority), a three-month window for the development of a new legislative election law, and parliamentary elections prior to presidential elections.

¶5. (C) The sequencing was developed in part to satisfy the presidential ambitions of General Aoun, who was enraged by a press statement delivered by Saad Hariri from Paris. When Hariri expressed a willingness to sit down with Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah, Aoun feared a revival of the Muslim "quadripartite alliance" (the 2005 election cooperation in some -- not all -- parts of Lebanon by Berri, Jumblatt, Hariri, and Nasrallah). Thus, to maintain his Christian cover, Nasrallah in his 1/23 press statement denounced the "quadripartite alliance" and got the Iranians to buy onto parliamentary preceding presidential elections. Aoun was mollified. But when Larajani went to Riyadh with his new, Syrian-inspired replacement for the earlier Khoja initiative, the Saudis -- worried about a Sunni-Shia fight in Lebanon -- fumed.

¶6. (C) Aridi believes that the Aoun-Hizballah alliance has

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"failed" in all of their attempts to topple the government, beginning with the attempt to delegitimize the Council of Ministers, up to and including yesterday's riots. But he believes that there will be more violence -- Syria, he said, will not stop -- and, while yesterday the conflict started by chance, it was clear that the opposition was prepared for any opportunity and was able to mobilize in thirty minutes. This ability to capitalize on the situation quickly foreshadows what Aridi sees as a very dangerous problem: the ability of Hizballah to control Beirut and possibly all of Lebanon, by dividing and isolating the Sunni population. The Saudis are extremely upset by this week's developments, Aridi reported.

ENDING TUESDAY'S STRIKE

¶7. (C) Moving to the earlier demonstrations, Aridi explained that the strikes on Tuesday seemed destined at first to remain a mostly Christian-on-Christian problem. The original clashes were instigated, according to Aridi, by "crazy" Aoun and his "little boy" Franjieh, but when those Christians withdrew as Samir Ja'ja' began deploying his Lebanese Forces fighters to forcibly open roads, Hizballah was ready, deploying its supporters to replace the retreating Aounists and Franjieh thugs. Thus, Hizballah eventually encircled Beirut.

¶8. (C) At that point, Walid Jumblatt started to agitate his Druse supporters in the Chouf Mountains, telling them that he was being choked off in his Beirut house. Jumblatt called LAF intelligence chief George Khoury (then sitting with PM Siniora): "Either you open the roads or I will." Aridi admitted that 200-300 Druse fighters were in the immediate neighborhood around Jumblatt's Clemenceau residence ready to go. Next, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman called Berri, threatening to resign (which would have left a Druse loyalist of Jumblatt as Acting Commander). Reportedly, Berri panicked, faced with increased threats of violence and Sleiman's potential departure. "Give me thirty minutes," Berri said; "nothing will happen." Subsequently, Berri

passed word via Saudi Ambassador Khoja that the strike would end.

#### SYRIA KEEPS IN TOUCH

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¶9. (C) According to Aridi, on Wednesday this week, Damascus summoned its Lebanese proxies -- including Franjieh, Talal Arslan, members of the SSNP, and others -- to praise the previous day's strike and call for more. The Syrian message was to do what it takes to derail the Special Tribunal. Although he had no proof of Aoun participation in the Syria trip, Aridi said that the Aounists might as well have been in Damascus, too, since they coordinate with the others later. Syria, Aridi said, has nothing to lose and everything to gain by continuing to meddle in the affairs of Lebanon and to promote violence. The Syrians will not accept the Tribunal, nor will they accept a Saudi-Iranian initiative which cuts the Syrians out of Lebanon.

¶10. (C) Asked how the Syrians convinced the Iranians to drop their initiative with the Saudis, Aridi said that the Syrians used the United States. The U.S., they told Iran, is pressuring Iran. Rather than have conflict in Iran, where the danger to Iran is greater, the Syrians counseled the Iranians to let Syria strike at the U.S. through Lebanon, by attacking U.S. interests here.

#### BERRI PUT ON THE SPOT

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¶11. (C) The next milestone on the Lebanese landscape was the eruption of violence yesterday, January 25, in Beirut. Aridi clearly believes that this was a chance act, but that it was not by accident that it escalated quickly. But what was by chance was the absence of Ambassador Khoja, who had traveled earlier in the day to Riyadh to learn the details of Prince Bandar's trip to Teheran the previous day (ref B). Khoja thus was able to call Berri from King Abdullah's office, pointedly telling the Speaker where he was. Khoja laid full responsibility for the events on Berri, urging him to use his authorities. Berri tap-danced for a while, but Khoja pressed, saying it was up to Berri to resolve the situation.

¶12. (C) Soon after hanging up the phone with Khoja, Berri

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then initiated a call to Jumblatt for the first time in weeks. While Berri called requesting help for a specific problem -- Jumblatt's forces had, to send a message, intentionally blocked the road through a Shia area near Naameh south of Beirut -- Aridi said that he and Jumblatt concluded that Berri was in fact opening a door. Immediately after that, LAF Commander Sleiman called Jumblatt, as Sleiman was trying to assemble a political consensus for the informal curfew he wanted to impose. Taking advantage of the opportunity offered by Berri, Jumblatt called Berri back to say three things: 1) he had reopened the road around Naameh, 2) he would support a curfew, and 3) he held Berri responsible for resolving the problem, meaning that Berri should recall Parliament if necessary to find a solution. Jumblatt vowed to help.

#### CURFEW

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¶13. (C) Questioned by the Ambassador how the LAF Commander could impose a curfew -- a power given only to the cabinet, which could not meet with most of its remaining members in Paris -- Aridi acknowledged that the curfew was not legal within the framework of the Lebanese constitution. At the same time, the situation on Thursday was quite dangerous. Thus, a quick round of telephone calls -- including one from Berri to Siniora, another development Aridi saw as a potentially positive sign -- confirmed that a political

consensus from all parties would support an LAF-imposed informal curfew. Aridi believes that Berri has both an opportunity and an interest in changing his position now, but may not have the power. But he thinks that everyone -- the Ambassador, Jumblatt, and others -- should do what they can to make Berri take on his responsibilities. "He IS the Shiite community!"

PICK A PRESIDENT  
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¶14. (C) Aridi -- who is close to Shawki al-Masri, the Druse second-in-command at the LAF -- told us that he did not believe that the LAF colluded or cooperated with the opposition during the strike and riots. While the LAF performance was miserable, he feels that the soldiers and officers are exhausted and fearful of splitting the army. Unfortunately, the LAF have no option but to fight. Given the passivity of the LAF especially on Tuesday, Aridi thought that Michel Sleiman has sharply reduced his chance to become the next Lebanese president: March 14 politicians no longer see him as a credibly neutral candidate. (Comment: Some never did. End comment.)

¶15. When asked about another presidential candidate, Central Bank President Riad Salameh, Aridi laughed and made the Ambassador promise not to forget to look into Salameh's actions ten days ago, which he described as "a real scandal."

It appears that Salameh may have used prior knowledge of Paris III to restructure debt at lower interest rates and thereby make a profit for him and others. Aridi also implied that Salameh did the same thing prior to Paris II. He also pointed out that Salameh uses some of the profits from his dealings to support Ad-Diyar newspaper and its owner Charles Ayyoub. (Note: We will look into these allegations further.) But, he added, "any Maronite" would do, but a good president would be able to resolve the current crisis.

COMMENT  
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¶16. (C) Aridi has traditionally been the "pro-Syrian" in Jumblatt's inner circle, with Marwan Hamadeh the "pro-west" advisor. He was the last of the Jumblatt crowd to accept his boss's break with Damascus, and rumors regularly circulate that Aridi is trying to mend fences between the Syrians and Jumblatt. Despite this traditional Syrian affinity, Aridi has also managed to establish a very close relationship with Saudi Ambassador Khoja -- just as Jumblatt uses Hamadeh for day-to-day contacts with the Americans and French, Jumblatt uses Aridi for his contacts with the Saudis. So we suspect that Aridi's information on recent developments is fairly sound. While his basic message was very bleak -- Syria will stop at nothing to derail the Tribunal, Syria scuttled a potential Saudi-Iranian way out of the crisis, and more violence is almost inevitable -- he reported this in a curiously matter-of-fact manner. He did hold out some glimmers of hope for the Berri-Jumblatt channel, although we

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do not see many areas of potential substantive agreement between the two old warlords at this point.

FELTMAN